

@ YOUR LIBRARY: PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MORE AT INDIANA LIBRARIES

*by Michele C. Russo, Guest Editor,
Indiana University South Bend*



Not so many years ago, public relations in libraries often consisted of no more than an occasional program or a few flyers and newsletters describing library services.

These activities principally took place in public libraries. Academic libraries might host an event, but the focus was primarily on fundraising, not on marketing their services. Neither did school nor special librarians feel the need to promote the library to their constituencies. Those were the days when librarians took for granted that everyone knew and understood the value of what we had to offer. We were *the* source for information; people needed us; and we didn't need to get involved with the perceived "messiness" of public relations.

Much has changed in recent years. We find ourselves competing with other agencies or departments for scarce resources. Many of our publics perceive that the Internet and the mega-bookstores are better places to find the information that they need. We find ourselves having to defend our very existence – something that was almost unheard of just a decade ago. We still have much to offer; indeed, we have more to offer than ever before. But we need to get the word out to draw people into our doors. To learn how we can better do this, more librarians have been turning to the field of public relations for help.

What exactly is public relations (PR) and how does it fit into libraries? One definition of PR is that it is "the business of trying to convince the public to have an understanding for and goodwill toward a person, firm, or institution."¹ Another states, "Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics...."² These definitions should help relieve the concern of some who might have connected PR to manipulation or the selling of products. Instead, PR is a positive activity that assists librarians in doing our jobs of opening the world of knowledge "by helping us bring together publics, collections, and services."³ It helps us build support and promote our services and resources. If decision makers truly know what we do, and if they know that

their constituencies value the library, then they will have a harder time reducing our budgets too quickly.

Public relations is also deeply intertwined with advocacy, marketing, communications, and development. It's almost impossible to be involved with any one of these activities without also affecting the others. They all work together to further the vital work of librarians.

In April 2001, the American Library Association officially launched its Campaign for American Libraries with its "@ your library™" brand. The external goals of this campaign include an increased visibility of libraries in a positive context; a renewed energy to the promotion of libraries and librarians; and increased library usage and funding. The key messages of the campaign are "libraries are changing and dynamic places; libraries are places of opportunity; and libraries bring you the world."⁴ As you will soon discover, there are an extraordinary number of innovative ways of getting these messages out.

This issue of *Indiana Libraries* is devoted to public relations activities happening around the state. Libraries of all types and sizes have found ways to tell their stories and to gain the understanding and goodwill from their constituencies. The ideas presented in these pages clearly demonstrate that Indiana librarians are creative, resourceful, and thoughtful in the ways that they approach PR.

Our first three articles provide information about some of the basics of PR work: working with the media, marketing, and programming. Using her five years of experience working for a suburban Chicago newspaper, **Linda Swisher** writes about how to effectively work with the media and includes information such as how to write press releases and public service announcements, how to submit photos, and how to get the best coverage possible. **Beth Smiertana** discusses how she markets the Carmel Public Library, primarily through a variety of publications aimed at different target groups, as well as through the formation of partnerships with organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce. She also emphasizes the importance of evaluating all that

you do for effectiveness. The ins and outs of programming are covered in the article by **Michelle Crowe** who strongly believes that programming is the best form of public relations.

Lissa Krull introduces the concept of branding with a broader interpretation than many may have heard before. After a discussion on the benefits of branding, she stresses the importance of living your brand so that anyone walking into the library experiences the excellent services that you tout in your mission statement.

Creativity is the key for reviving a very small public library. **Stanley Campbell** describes the actions that he has taken to increase the average attendance from 75 patrons per month to over 900 at the Poseyville Carnegie Public Library. On the other end of the spectrum, **Eric Bartheld** is responsible for publicizing the services and resources of one of the largest academic libraries in the country at Indiana University Bloomington. Know your audience, plan your work carefully, and market “a look” are all themes that work well no matter what type of library you’re in.

Reaching out in different ways to various special populations within your constituency is an important and highly effective PR strategy. **Marie Albertson** writes a touching story about an Indiana State Library program which helps prisoners stay a part of their children’s lives through reading. Incarcerated mothers and fathers can be taped reading a story to their children, thus providing a link which otherwise would be lost to these separated families.

Several of the authors in this issue talk about the importance of good public relations starting internally. **Susie Cleaver** discusses the Mishawaka-Penn-Harris Public Library’s understanding of this through their program of offering college scholarships to qualifying pages. Undoubtedly, the young adults who receive these scholarships will become life-long library supporters.

Joyce Welkie describes outreach to children through painted floor-to-ceiling windows in the Plainfield-Guilford Township Public Library. The artwork changes with the seasons or to announce upcoming programs. This article will make all wish that we would have such talent on our staffs!

School librarians are particularly facing the threats of cutbacks. **Janella Knieren** states in her article that “marketing a library/media center and its programs is more than just good public relations – it’s our survival.” If you can relate to this, then you will welcome the dozens of ideas that Knieren has on how to promote your library.

Patrons with disabilities often are not aware of library services designed especially for them. When the Indiana State University Library realized this, their public relations team got involved. **Carol Jinbo** and **Jean Flak** describe the steps the Library took and the partnerships that they formed with various agencies on-campus and

within the community to raise awareness and to become a pro-active leader on campus concerning disability issues.

Jo Ann Byers writes about two special services the Warsaw Public Library provides for senior citizens who are unable to come to the Library. In addition to the more familiar homebound services, the Library staff visits elder-care facilities to read and provide other activities for their residents.

Donors are also a special population who cannot be ignored in our outreach efforts. **Katharina Blackstead** from the University of Notre Dame, discusses the strong link between stewardship and public relations as she describes the various components of the stewardship program at Notre Dame.

Having fun is one excellent way to promote the library to returning college students. **Carol Evans** describes the library fair that she and her colleagues held for students last fall at Indiana State University. Provide food, games, and prizes and they *will* venture inside your doors and discover all that you have to offer.

Our last article is an annotated bibliography compiled by **Nancy Colborn**. She provides citations to books, journals, and websites that can help those new to the field of PR librarianship or those who just need to be renewed.

I want to thank all those who contributed to this issue for sharing their wealth of ideas. It would be tempting for readers to only concentrate on the articles that pertain to their type and size of library. I would urge you, however, to read through all the articles. Most of the ideas can easily be adapted for different types of libraries and for different constituencies. While no one will have the time to implement all of the suggestions found in these pages, no one should ever run out of ideas. Libraries have too much to value to our communities to be overlooked. It’s important to get the word out—It’s all happening @ your library!

NOTES

¹ Lisa A. Wolfe. *Library Public Relations, Promotions, and Communications: a How-To-Do-It Manual*. NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 1997, p 8.

² Rex F. Harlow, “Building a Public Relations Definition,” *Public Relations Review* 2 (Winter 1976): 36.

³ Anne F. Roberts and Susan Griswold Blandy. *Public Relations for Librarians*. Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1989, p. 3.

⁴ “Key Messages,” *ALA @ Your Library: The Campaign for America’s Libraries*. Available online from <https://cs.ala.org/@yourlibrary/keymessages.cfm>.

For further information, contact Michele Russo at mrusso@iusb.edu.